

From Field to Table

Fruit and Vegetable Programs

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The American consumer enjoys one of the most plentiful, affordable, and wholesome supplies of fruits, vegetables, and nuts in the world. To ensure that consumers receive their billions of pounds of fruits, vegetables, and nuts economically and with quality assurance, producers, wholesalers, processors, retailers, and numerous others must maintain an efficient, equitable, and reliable distribution system. The Fruit and Vegetable Programs of the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), U.S. Department of Agriculture, help to maintain this system. The wide-ranging services provided by the Fruit and Vegetable Programs are unlike most government programs because approximately 80 percent of the Programs' funds are derived from fees paid by users. The remaining 20 percent is appropriated annually by Congress.

Grading

The Fruit and Vegetable Programs annually grade more than 94 billion pounds of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and other specialty crops. Certification, performed by highly trained graders, provides buyers and sellers with an objective, third-party evaluation of a product's quality and condition. Funded through user fees, grading is primarily voluntary, except when it is required by specific laws, regulations, or government contracts. Anyone who has a financial interest in a product may request the grading service. In addition, through inspection and other quality assurance services, the Fruit and Vegetable Programs help the Department of Defense ensure the quality of military rations.

Standards

To provide uniformity in grading and a recognized language of commerce, the Fruit and Vegetable Programs have developed more than 300 standards for fresh and processed fruits, vegetables, nuts, and related products. The standards describe the quality characteristics for each grade of commodity as they are valued in the marketplace. In this way, the standards give buyers and sellers a common language with which to trade. Depending on the commodity, factors such as color, maturity, sugar and acid content, size, and defects help determine a product's grade. In addition, the Fruit and Vegetable Programs play an active role in the development and adjustment of international standards for fresh and processed fruit, vegetable, and specialty crop commodities.

Market News

Market news provides the timely exchange of information among growers, shippers, wholesalers, and others on supplies, demand, and prices to aid buyers and sellers in making purchasing and sales decisions. Federal and state market news reporters cover 355 domestic and international markets and report on approximately 400 different fruits, vegetables, ornamental crops, and related commodities. There are a variety of reports, including terminal market reports, shipping point reports, national shipping point trends, national truck rate and cost reports, AMS food purchases reports, marketing summaries, a biweekly international report, and more. Data are sent by Internet, E-mail, satellite, facsimile machines, newspapers, radio, television, and (to paying subscribers) printed reports.

Research and Promotion

Research and promotion programs are designed to expand certain commodity markets. Industry-operated boards collect assessments from designated segments of the industry to cover the cost of market research and consumer promotion activities. The Fruit and Vegetable Programs oversee such programs for cultivated blueberries, honey, mushrooms, peanuts, popcorn, potatoes, and watermelons.

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Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act (PACA)

The PACA prohibits unfair and fraudulent practices in the fresh and frozen fruit and vegetable industry and provides a means of enforcing contracts. The PACA program also helps ensure that produce-related assets remain available to pay produce suppliers if a receiver enters bankruptcy proceedings. Most traders of fresh or frozen produce must have a valid PACA license, which is issued by the Fruit and Vegetable Programs. PACA license fees provide the primary means of financial support for the PACA program.

Marketing Orders and Agreements

Fruit and vegetable marketing orders and agreements are programs that give growers of agricultural products the authority to work together to develop dependable markets for their products. Authorized means to achieve this goal include establishing minimum quality standards to keep inferior products from depressing markets, using research and promotion projects, and applying volume controls to stabilize the short-term rate of commodity shipments or allocate supplies between primary and secondary outlets. Currently, there are 36 marketing agreements and orders in effect for fruits, vegetables, and related crops -- covering 32 commodities grown in 32 States.

Commodity Procurement

The Fruit and Vegetable Programs encourage the consumption of surplus fresh and processed fruits and vegetables by purchasing such commodities and donating them to schools, charitable institutions, and other eligible outlets. Funds for this purpose are annually appropriated from U.S. Customs Service receipts and other sources. In recent years, annual purchases have averaged around \$200 million.

Food Quality Assurance

To ensure that the federal government purchases food as efficiently and economically as possible, the Governmentwide Food Quality Assurance Program coordinates quality assurance and purchase specifications. Working with other Federal agencies, the Fruit and Vegetable Programs manages the governmentwide development, revision, review, approval, and cancellation of Commercial Item Descriptions and Federal specifications for food.

Economic Analysis and Program Planning

The Economic Analysis and Program Planning Branch provides economic research and data support to other branches of the Fruit and Vegetable Programs. Chief among the programs requiring economic information support are those for marketing agreements and orders, and commodity procurement.

Information

For more information, contact the Fruit and Vegetable Programs, Agricultural Marketing Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Room 2077-S, Stop 0235, Washington, DC 20250-0235. Telephone: (202) 720-4722. Fax: (202) 720-0016. E-mail: robert.keeney@usda.gov. Internet: www.ams.usda.gov/fv.

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